

## China-MENA Relations in the Context of Chinese Global Strategy

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## China's Relationship with the Middle East and North African Countries – A Historical Perspective

Historically, the states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have featured on China's (back then – the People's Republic of China) geopolitical compass for different reasons. Nevertheless, there are certain general ideological underlying bases that to this day have been guiding the selection of partners: the non-aligned status, communist internationalism, and, finally, economic considerations.

During the Cold War, after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) provided the context of Chinese relations with like-minded Middle Eastern states. After the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014]) provided the basic pillars of the friendly relationship between China and the non-aligned MENA states – Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Sudan and Tunisia, all of which joined the NAM in the 1960s (later, other Arab countries and the Palestinians also joined) (Haddad-Fonda, 2015). In 1956, Egypt was the first Arab country to recognise China's communist government primarily for its "neutrality" (followed by Syria, North Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria and Sudan in the same year). The five principles of peaceful coexistence have remained relevant to this day: these provide not only the political cornerstone of the relationship, and a common front from which Western interventions are regularly criticised and opposed, but also are essential elements in the Chinese self-perception of the responsible superpower.

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the new Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping adopted a novel approach to foreign policy (Vogel & Ezra, 2011). Rather than pursuing revolutionary aims in external affairs, Deng sought to normalise ties with other countries and open up China to the rest of the world, primarily by creating special economic zones and inviting foreign capital to them. Coming after two decades of disastrous economic and social policies, chief among them the Great Leap Forward between 1958 and 1962, the reform and opening of the 1980s thus led to an era of unparalleled economic growth. It also inaugurated a new, practical and instrumental approach in external affairs that appreciated the potential role of foreign partners in China's long modernisation process.

This foreign policy reassessment under Deng Xiaoping also introduced a new element to the Chinese perception of the MENA states and a new point of selection, namely the economic “usefulness” of the selected states. As the country witnessed unprecedented economic growth during that period, it became a top priority for the Beijing government to secure stable oil supplies for its domestic economy (Besada & Salam, 2017). Consequently, Chinese foreign policy has been characterised by a transactional approach, illustrated by a plethora of economic agreements.

Presently, China’s relations with the MENA states continue to expand, and a number of key factors explain why this is expected to continue. The most important is the economic one. The MENA region is of specific importance to China as an area rich in energy resources needed to sustain the growth in China, offering vast opportunities for substantial infrastructure investments in ports, railways and highways, as well as in nuclear energy and high-tech development. Besides the continued (although slowly diminishing) reliance on MENA oil, the non-oil exporting countries of North Africa are increasingly serving as export markets for Beijing. Moreover, countries in the Persian Gulf (as well as Egypt) are strategically placed on the trade route to Africa and Europe.

## China’s Global Expansion and the Belt and Road Initiative

Before exploring China’s modern relationship with the MENA states any further, it is vital to take a step back and examine the broader context within which it developed, namely Chinese President Xi Jinping’s flagship foreign and economic policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, previously One Belt One Road or OBOR), also called the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative.

First presented by Xi in September 2013, the initiative is a series of hard and soft infrastructure projects intended to revive the ancient Silk Road to connect China and Europe. The “belt” – or SREB – is a land route linking China to Europe through Central Asia and the Middle East while the “road” – or MSR – is a maritime route linking South China to the Mediterranean through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. Together, they have been dubbed by some commentators the “Chinese Marshall Plan”, as it was mainly envisioned to develop the Eurasian continent, but the geography of the BRI has developed to be open to all nations.

The original Silk Road was established around 140 BCE during Han Dynasty and developed as China’s westward economic expansion during the first millennium BC.

Westward it connected through Central Asia China to Europe and southward through the Indian subcontinent to Europe. The Roman and later the Byzantine Empires and China traded goods like silk and spices from China, and gold, horses and furs from Europe, thus connecting markets along the Silk Road creating wealth as well as cultural and religious exchange. During this period, culture and trade flourished in the area between the Mediterranean and China with new cities and states established until Europe in the first half of the second millennium discovered new ship routes to India and colonised the Americas while China came under pressure from the Mongols (Frankopan, 2015). The main route went between the Mediterranean and China through Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and continued via Afghanistan to Xi'an in Central China. As such, MENA was an important part of the ancient Silk Road not only in trade and exchange of commodities but also in the spreading of culture and religion, first Buddhism westward from China and later Islam eastward from MENA, where Muslims settled (especially in the Western provinces of China, e.g. Uighurs in Xinjiang and Hui Muslims in the Northwest China). Along the route, ideas were disseminated enabling the different eastern and western civilizations to interact and develop (Frankopan, 2015). MENA and China were also connected via a maritime route from Guanzhou (Canton) in Southern China through Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean to The Red Sea and Alexandria.

With the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China initiated an impressive economic development that over 40 years lifted 800 million out of poverty, developed China to have an expanded and modern infrastructure, and created big cities and agglomerations. The population of Shenzhen, for instance – the main centre for the Chinese multinational companies like Huawei – rose from approximately 50,000 inhabitants in 1980 to 12 million in 2020. In 1980, Shenzhen was designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in order to develop market, industry and infrastructure. The SEZ appears to be the role model in the structure of the BRI with its creation of economic corridors. The successful economic development has left China with a booming economy but also with surplus capital, capacity and manpower, as well as a need to sustain economic growth and transform the economy to become innovative and high-tech oriented. The background for the BRI is, therefore, an economic strategy to invest the surplus capacity in westward expansion, coupled with other motives such as improving stability through development from the Xinjiang province into Central and South Asia, establishing new trade, investment opportunities and export markets, increasing Chinese influence in the region and beyond, as well as weakening the United States' (US) dominance in the regional and global economy (Cai, 2018). Finally, as an expert on China, Elizabeth Economy (2018) argued, the aim was to "shape international norms and institutions and forcefully assert its presence on the global stage."

While the initiative is presented by the Chinese leadership as neutral and beneficial to all (Xi, 2017), it de facto aims to put China at the centre of global trade routes and primarily focuses on advancing Chinese economic interests. Indeed, it has been ostensibly designed as an economic policy project, focused on helping Chinese companies to grow through overseas projects and markets, to export industrial overcapacity and to obtain strategic assets including natural resources and technology. From a foreign policy point of view, Beijing hopes that closer economic ties forged through the BRI will strengthen diplomatic relations between China and the countries along the routes and promote multi-polar world order. From a geopolitical perspective, the BRI is a strategic countermeasure to the Barack Obama strategy “Pivot to East Asia” from 2012, which Beijing interpreted as a US attempt to contain China.

The structure and definition of the BRI have progressively evolved and expanded since Xi’s announcement in 2013. In 2015, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs defined the objectives of the BRI in its Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Xu, 2015). The paper emphasises five priorities: political coordination, connectivity of facilities, trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. The same year, China hosted an Asia-Europe Meeting where it provided more details on the structure of the BRI and announced the creation of six economic corridors. As the BRI has developed to become a global project and all different kinds of initiatives are put under its umbrella, it may be questioned whether the corridors still matter. However, when analysing the economy and the initiatives prioritised by the Chinese government, it still makes sense to focus on the activity in the corridors as the World Bank does in its report on BRI economics (World Bank, 2019). One of these corridors, the China-Central West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC) is mainly centred on China’s connectivity to the Middle East (although not North Africa). In 2017, China hosted its inaugural Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, followed by a second one in April 2019. The attendance levels show a sharp increase of participation between the two forums, with the number of heads of state attending going up from 29 to 36. Interestingly, among MENA states, only the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sent top-level representation to the 2019 Forum.

Despite these continuous efforts to define and promote the BRI, the structure, the mechanisms and the delimitation of the initiative remain extremely vague. The broad definition of the BRI allows a wide range of projects to be included that ordinary international economic relations would have covered anyway. Indeed, Xi Jinping has underlined that the BRI is not only about infrastructure and connectivity but also investment in health and education financed by Silk Road funds established by China (Xi, 2017; Swaine, 2015).

Parallel to the development of the BRI, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Establishment of the AIIB was prompted by identification of a major infrastructure gap in Asia in a report published in 2009 (ADB, 2009) by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), dominated by Japan and the US. In 2015, 50 countries led by China signed the project and the bank was established with equity of USD 100 billion, of which China injected half. However, as China researcher Yitzhak Shichor argues, economics alone cannot explain why China decided to establish the AIIB since existing national and transnational institutions such as the ADB or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) already exist. For Shichor (2018), China's objective in creating the AIIB is to bypass other organisations, which, due to being traditionally dominated by the US and Japan, have repeatedly made China feel discriminated against, whether regarding membership preconditions or in terms of the voting power. Not surprisingly, both the US and Japan declined the invitation to join the AIIB.

Initiating the BRI and establishing the AIIB is an enormous project that for its implementation need huge Chinese financing, maybe more than USD one trillion (Chatzky & McBride, 2020) and the question is whether China has the resources to spend so much on the project especially if the global economy bumps into a major crisis with the risk of recession. Still, it is an impressive project that would increase China's global economic and geopolitical position and if successfully implemented it will give China huge impact on regional development as well as on international institutions (Cai, 2018). As such, the BRI has inspired or maybe provoked both the European Union (EU) and the US to develop global connectivity projects. However, the BRI and AIIB have also met resistance and criticisms from partners, e.g. Malaysia, which argue the costs are all too expensive and with the risk of a global economy in a recession these challenges to the BRI will be increasing in the coming years (Crawford & Gordon, 2020). Further, the BRI has increasingly been met by worries in the EU that find it necessary to protect its sensitive infrastructure and outspoken criticism from the US that accuses the BRI of being a Chinese strategy to obtain global hegemony.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that China does attach more strategic meaning to certain parts of the BRI than to others. Notably, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor are projected to not only contribute to regional development and stability but also provide China with alternative routes of transportation and sources of energy. Both the Central-West Asia and CPEC corridors would reduce China's "Malacca Dilemma". The term was coined by former Chinese president Hu Jintao in 2003 to refer to the situation whereby China relies on the Malacca Strait for its marine transportation, while the strait can be blocked

by rival – Indian and American – navies in the event of a conflict. The planned corridors are therefore crucial to China's global trade and strategic interests, a necessary component of Xi Jinping's China Dream of rejuvenating the Chinese nation.

## The MENA Region's Position within the BRI

As already mentioned, the MENA region is crucial for the development of the BRI because its location between the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf is important along the land route as well as the sea lanes and because the MENA connects East Asia with Eurasia and Europe (even though many countries in the region have initially been excluded from the project and joined the BRI later by virtue of signing Memorandums of Understanding [MoUs]). In 2017, China became the world's largest importer of oil and in 2018 of gas, and is currently the biggest buyer of energy resources from the Persian Gulf. In the past decade, China's trade volume with the Middle East has increased tenfold and China's economic interests in the region match the Gulf countries' efforts to diversify foreign economic relations and restructure their economies away from a reliance on oil (for more on the economic relationship between China and the MENA region, see Chapter 2). China and the national governments in the region have expressed intentions of cooperation between the BRI and the latter's national development plans, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030.

While, as already mentioned, the BRI is a strategy for China to increase its position vis-à-vis the US "Pivot to Asia" strategy, China acknowledges the US security hegemony in the region and thus far has no intention to challenge it. However, with increased dependence on energy and investments in megaprojects, trade and connectivity, as well as interest in critical infrastructure investments – and deploying vast numbers of Chinese nationals in conjunction with the activities – a security dimension is unavoidable and will challenge China in the coming years, as will the many conflicts in the region. Following its traditional policy of neutrality and non-interference is, in the long run, impossible: remaining equally close to Iran and Saudi Arabia, for instance, will become increasingly challenging for Beijing.

Continently for China, its efforts to cement influence in the MENA region came at a time of a decline of American influence in the region (or the perception thereof). After the September 2001 terror attacks against the US, a series of American military interventions followed that led many regional leaders to question whether Washington is a force for

good. In addition, the years following the 2003 Iraqi intervention have seen much hesitancy and uncertainty in America's overall approach towards the MENA region (including the already mentioned pivot to Asia by Obama and the very selective relationship with a very few in the region by the Trump administration), leading to the perception that Washington is no longer a solid security provider whose key objective is regional peace and stability (Quero & Dessi, 2019). Today, Washington continues to suffer from low approval ratings in the MENA countries, all the while China is seen globally to be on the rise (although admittedly this is not seen equally favourably across the region, see next section of this Chapter) (Wike et al., 2018). The fact that US soft power had been on the decline in the Middle East renders the region particularly exposed to a new great power rivalry, and the Chinese regime is interested in taking advantage of the growing vacuum left by the US. This is complemented by the generally acknowledged lack of political conditioning by China. The objective is to further displace American and Western influence by tying the region to Beijing primarily through grand-scale economic initiatives like the BRI. At the same time, China is neither willing nor ready to take over the role played by Washington as the primary security provider of the region (Fulton, 2019b).

At the same time, however, the successful implementation of the BRI is dependent upon the stability and security of the MENA region, a realisation that precipitated a reconsideration of China's traditionally apolitical and neutral approach. Overall, the primary challenge for China lies in its continued ability to expand and exploit mutually beneficial economic opportunities in a region where recurring political and social crises tend to engender volatility and instability. Tackling this challenge necessitates some adjustment in China's traditionally non-interventionist foreign policy, a recognition that informs China's first-ever Arab Policy Paper from 2016. The paper provides articulation for a revamped Chinese role conception in the MENA region, with a new focus on political and security considerations as much as on economic and development goals (Almeida, 2018).

China's foreign policy relations with the MENA region are pursued mostly in the bilateral and multilateral formats – with the regional approach being still relatively low. The Chinese lack of conceptualising the MENA region as a whole is further underpinned by the fact that there is no regional cooperation framework that would include all of the Arab states, Israel, Iran and Turkey.

China seeks to draw closer to the MENA states through its practice of “partnership diplomacy” and membership in a number of multilateral/regional institutions. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), founded in 2004, or the Forum on



China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2006, are important regional fora where deliberations between China and Arab countries take place at regular intervals and at a high political level. For instance, at the eighth ministerial meeting of CASCF in 2018, participants agreed to establish a strategic partnership, which was lauded by many as a milestone in the development of the relationship ("Arab experts, scholars", 2018). China is equally committed to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), having supported the establishment of the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue in 2010 ("China-Gulf Cooperation Council", 2017). The primary item of discussion within this cooperation framework is a possible free trade agreement (FTA). While several rounds of negotiations were held between 2004 and 2006 with talks subsequently resumed in 2016, the FTA deal remains to be concluded (Qian & Fulton, 2018).

Chinese membership in multilateral/regional organisations is complemented with a focus on partnership diplomacy (Strüver, 2017). The Beijing government pursues bilateral agreements with individual MENA governments based on common interests, rather than common threat perceptions or ideological commonalities – in spite of the fact that the threat of radical Islam and terrorism does play a role. Doing so allows China not to be bogged down in the region with serious political commitments, as would be the case in a pan-regional alliance structure, but to enhance its room for manoeuvre and discretion to act more freely.

Generally speaking, there are three major categories of partnerships sought by China today: strategic partnerships, partnerships, and potential partnerships (Yue, 2019). Within each category, there is further differentiation with regards to the exact type of relationship. The language used in partnership titles displays a wealth of expressions to grasp the true quality of bilateral ties. For instance, though both Pakistan's (2010) and Germany's (2014) partnership with China are at the level of strategic partnership, the former is called an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, while the latter is an all-round strategic partnership (Li & Ye, 2019). These differences in adjectives do not, however, change the fundamentally strategic nature of relations China has with Pakistan and Germany, respectively. To clarify the terminology in Beijing's parlance, Premier Wen Jiabao defined these key terms as they are used in the context of the China-EU relationship. Accordingly, comprehensive means "all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered"; strategic means "long-term and stable"; and partnership means that the relationship is "equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win" (Wen, 2004).

Today, there is a general shift away from military-based alliances towards more flexible partnerships, and this change in the appeal of different relationship types is not limited

to China. With the end of the Cold War, major powers find it less attractive to build “rigid and static alliances” (Strüver, 2017) and instead seek more malleable ties that can accommodate relations with significant areas of difference. For China specifically, there are at least two more reasons underpinning its interest in partnerships. The first is the Cold War hangover from having forged a short-lived and ill-fated military alliance with the Soviet Union in February 1950. The relationship’s quick disintegration in the 1960s and the eventual split between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union informs Beijing’s reluctance today to enter into similarly strong commitments. The second reason has to do with the fact that alliance-formation is perceived by China to be an American practice that is zero-sum and leaves many countries around the globe insecure (Pei, 2014). Partnerships offer an alternative for Beijing with better geopolitical prospects and less of a heavy baggage in firm commitments.

As of March 2020, China enjoys comprehensive strategic partnerships with five MENA states and strategic partnerships with another eight. The five states are Algeria (2014), Egypt (2014), Iran (2016), Saudi Arabia (2016) and the UAB (2018). “Comprehensive strategic partnerships” figure at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of China’s partnerships, meaning that these five countries are attributed an outstanding significance in China’s geostrategic vision. The fact that three of the five are located in the Gulf provides further illustration of Beijing’s primary focus and interest in the MENA region (Fulton, 2019b).

One can distinguish three distinct but overlapping motivations that explain the Beijing government’s drive towards establishing partnerships. The first has to do with the countering and neutralising of US influence around the globe. As Washington remains committed to military alliances that are zero-sum in nature, Beijing’s partnerships work to undermine and displace American influence and showcase an alternative conception of bilateral ties. China’s partnerships in sensitive regions such as the Middle East are obvious illustrations of this consideration. The second reason concerns peace and stability in China’s neighbourhood. The association between security and partnership is most explicit in the case of the SCO. Two years following Jiang Zemin’s proclamation of a new security concept in 1999, the SCO was established to jointly coordinate security and economic developments in the Central Asian region (Yue, 2019). Another example is, again, provided by the MENA region. The strategic cooperative partnerships with Afghanistan and Pakistan are partly intended for China to have better understanding and control over terrorism in the region and beyond. The third reason is linked specifically to China’s interest in closer ties with countries that feature prominently in the BRI. The objective is to guarantee both the successful international implementation of Beijing’s grandiose economic plan as well as its modernisation efforts at home. For this reason,

Strüver (2017) argues that there is a fundamentally practical logic underlying Chinese efforts to establish partnerships. Rather than being based upon ideological considerations, partnerships are meant precisely to bridge differences in values and domestic sociopolitical systems for the sake of mutual economic benefit.

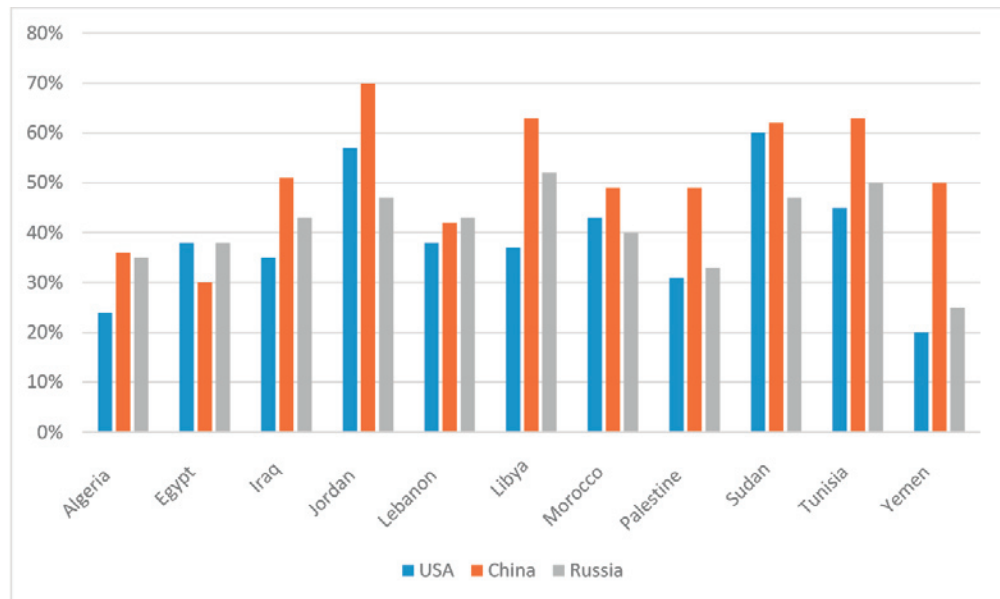
As is commonly accepted, China is both integrating into the world order and is gradually modifying it with its own initiatives and actions. The establishment of strategic partnerships around the world fits into that Janus-faced logic. They solidify global support for the Beijing government and thus exert a conservative effect by casting China in the light of a status quo power. At the same time, they also help in showcasing how China does things differently from the West. Nowhere is this effect more obvious than in the MENA region, where the long historical record of Western countries' botched interventions continues to sustain a tangible appetite for China's blooming partnership diplomacy.

## Reception and Perception of Chinese Involvement in the MENA Among Stakeholders in the Region

Unlike in the majority of EU or North American countries, public opinion on China and its expanding geopolitical and economic role appears to be mostly positive in the MENA countries. This seems true for both ruling elites and citizens, as evidenced by the few public opinion polls and surveys available, as well as public utterances by politicians in the region. From a country that not so long ago barely existed in the public consciousness (as reflected by its absence from public opinion questionnaires), China has become a recognised and to a large extent appreciated global player – although, naturally, perceptions do vary in between individual countries.

For instance, according to the latest (2019) wave of the Arab Barometer, half of the Arab public surveyed would prefer to have closer economic ties with China (see Figure 1) – but the answers ranged from 30% in Egypt, through 49% in Palestine, to 63% in Libya and 70% in Jordan (Arab Barometer V). Only in Egypt was public support for a stronger economic relationship with China lower than that with the US or Russia. In all remaining 11 Arab states where the survey has been conducted, the public prefers getting closer to Beijing than to Washington or Moscow. This is in line with the findings of an earlier, third wave of the Arab Barometer (2013), when 56% of the Arab public wanted stronger economic ties with China (compared to 45% with the US) – although it is worth noting that the number of those hoping to strengthen the relationship with China went slightly down between wave III (2013) and wave V (2018) (from 55.9% to 51.3%).

**Figure 1.** Percentage of citizens in selected MENA countries preferring stronger economic ties with US/China/Russia (2018/2019)



Source: Arab Barometer V

Another glimpse of the public perceptions on China is offered by Pew Research Center's annual Global Attitudes Survey, which allows how attitudes towards China developed in the MENA region over time to be traced, albeit admittedly on an example of four countries only: Israel, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey (Pew Research Center, 2019). In the picture painted by the survey results, Turkey is the least pro-Chinese country of all four and the one most suspicious of the impact of Chinese rise on its own economy. The Lebanese public, on the other hand, appears to be the most enthusiastic towards Beijing, with Tunisia and Israel somewhere in the middle.

Between 2007 (2013 in the case of Tunisia) and 2019, the number of those who had a very or somewhat favourable opinion of China in all four countries went up and the number of those having a (somewhat or very) unfavourable one – decreased, even as the Turks continued to see China mostly in a negative light (44% in 2019 against 37% having a favourable opinion of the country). Indeed, Turkey was the only country in which the public (four out of ten respondents) was closer to the view that “investment from China is a bad thing because it gives China too much influence” rather than “investment from China is a good thing because it creates jobs in (your country).” In the remaining

three, for a majority (60%, 60% and 69%, respectively) the opposite was true. Along similar lines, among those that do believe China does have an impact on their country (2019), more Turks believed that this was a negative rather than a positive one (55% versus 31%), while in the other three the opposite is true (42% versus 50% in Tunisia, 23% versus 53% in Lebanon, and 17% versus 65% in Israel). Overall, roughly two thirds (2019) of Israelis, Lebanese and Tunisians thought that China's growing economy "is a good thing" for their country. Turks were once again of a different opinion, with half of them believing it impacts their country in a negative way (although it was still a decline by six percentage points compared to 2013).

Among the MENA population, China is increasingly seen as an important player both globally and regionally. While the US remains the world's leading economic power in the eyes of the majority of the people in the countries surveyed, China secured a strong second place (EU countries sadly if predictably gathered between 3% [Israel] and 13% [Turkey] of votes in 2019 but the trend was upward compared to 2013).

Unsurprisingly, then, maintaining strong economic ties with Beijing is seen as crucial. In fact, for the Lebanese public (2019) it was more important to do so with China (39%) than with the US (25%). In other countries surveyed, the public preferred the latter (although while in Israel by a difference of 47 percentage points, in Turkey – only 12) or would prefer equally strong ties to both (two halves of those surveyed in Tunisia). At the same time, the Lebanese, Tunisians and Turks already see their relationship with China in a much brighter light than that with the US (although the Turkish public is the least positive about both countries, with one in three Turks believing the relationship of their country with China was bad, and two in three thinking the same about the relationship with the US). The vast majority of the Israelis, on the other hand, are of the opinion that they already do have a good relationship with both the US (96%) and China (83%).

Attitudes towards Beijing among the political elites in the MENA region appear to be mostly positive as well.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, pariah regimes of Iran and Syria are among the most vocal in their support for China, on whose support they rely. Damascus is focused on courting Beijing in a hope it will play a major role in the rebuilding of the country destroyed by civil war, which has just entered its tenth year. Indeed, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in an interview for China's Phoenix Television praised the BRI, stressing that it was a tool for "improv[ing] the social, economic and security conditions of all countries in this initiative and promot[ing] stability and prosperity in the world" (Al-Watan, 2019). Similarly, the Syrian Ambassador to China underlined that his country is "an integral part of the BRI" and the two countries share ambitious plans for the

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<sup>1</sup> Selection of media sources based on curation of a monthly edition of the ChinaMed Observer: "Collection of the analyses of the most interesting articles on the relations between China and the Mediterranean region published by Chinese and Mediterranean media every month" (<https://www.chinamed.it/>).

reconstruction phase (Jabur, 2019). The Iranian regime, for its part, described its relationship with Beijing “as the most important in the world” (“Zarif: The relationship with China”, 2019) and, much like Damascus, is portraying China “as a powerful ally engaged in the fight against the common enemy, the United States” – even as occasionally it needs to publicly remind the authorities in Beijing that they are “expected to be more active in buying Iranian oil” (ChinaMed, 2019b).

The media through the region routinely report assertions on the part of various authorities regarding the blooming and mutually beneficial relationship between China and their respective countries. This is not to say, however, that critical voices are completely absent. For instance, Turkey has been about the only Muslim-majority country which openly, if rather timidly, criticised Beijing for the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinyang (Westcott & Sariyuce, 2019; “Not all Uyghurs”, 2020) and has been forthright about its displeasure with the growing trade deficit with China (Cetingulec, 2019). The Israeli media – and some politicians as well – are on the other hand “extremely critical” of the possibility of having Chinese companies engaged in the construction of key parts of Israeli logistic infrastructure (ChinaMed, 2019a; Efron et al., 2019). Indeed, the media coverage reportedly “sometimes has even bordered on Sinophobia” (Yellinek, 2020).

In the GCC countries, in turn, China is perceived both as an important energy buyer and investor by governments attempting to diversify their economies under respective “Vision” plans (Abu Dhabi 2030, Bahrain’s Economic Vision 2030, Saudi Vision 2030, New Kuwait 2035, Qatar National Vision 2030, and Oman’s Vision 2040). Indeed, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman depicted the BRI as “one of the main pillars of the Saudi Vision 2030” (Fulton, 2019a). Along similar lines, a sovereign wealth fund of Abu Dhabi created a joint investment fund with Chinese institutions to jointly support achieving the aims of the BRI and the Abu Dhabi 2030 development plan (Fulton, 2019b).

This generally positive sentiment towards China can be explained by a number of factors. Starting from the most obvious ones, investment and developmental assistance (for details, see Chapter 2) are very much welcome in all countries throughout the region, especially if it comes without the conditionality normally attached to Western money. Indeed, as an “economy-first” country – unlike the geopolitically-minded US, France, United Kingdom or Russia – China has been abiding by its non-interference principle, refraining from commenting on a given country’s human rights track record or (dis)respect of rule-of-law principles (Sun & Zoubir, 2015), a policy started back in 1949 with its proclamation of the Non-Aligned Movement and still winning over various more and less

authoritarian regimes in the region. Moreover, unlike the US, whose withdrawal from the MENA region created an opportune power vacuum, it has never invaded or been involved in a military intervention in any of the countries in the region.

Unlike some EU countries, it does not have a history of colonialism. Indeed, to varying degrees, the MENA countries have all suffered at the hands of Western colonial powers, which makes the region not only sceptical about the goodwill of Western powers (wave V of the Arab Barometer showed that nearly half of the respondents in the region are of the opinion that the main reason why Western countries send aid to the Arab world is to “gain influence”) but also more accommodating towards external actors with a less tainted historical reputation. Chinese politicians regularly point out that Qing China was practically a semi-colony throughout the 19th century, meaning the Chinese historical experience shows similarities with the MENA region. Chinese leaders thus frame their country in terms of a developing country, not least because the Third World is, in Chinese political jargon, the primary locus where the struggle against “colonialism, imperialism, and hegemonism” takes place (Yu, 1977). This common anti-Western legacy is not simply irrelevant political rhetoric but a key assumption upon which Chinese foreign policy is based. For instance, the Beijing government often criticises the UN Security Council for failing to properly represent and channel in the interests of developing countries (“Chinese envoy urges ”, 2019). Another indication is China’s insistence upon its “developing country” status within the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Lee, 2019).

At the same time, the differences in the attitudes between citizens of different MENA countries can be partly explained by the differences in national interests and the shape of the national discourse. The Turks will likely be more critical of China due to its treatment of the Turkic-speaking Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, as well as the national discourse on the unequal economic relationship between the two countries. At the same time, the strength of the deployment of Chinese soft power in a given country also matters. As argued by Yellinek (2020), it is Beijing’s efforts to win over the Israelis that resulted in the Israeli public being particularly favourable towards China, despite the highly negative press coverage of the “Chinese issue” in the country (see more about Chinese soft power in Chapter 3).

As the Chinese economic presence in the region is growing, it might be increasingly difficult for Beijing to separate its geo-economic and geopolitical interests and maintain its position of a neutral economic actor. The public in the region seems to have mixed feelings about China’s growing military power. While more people in all countries surveyed (Israel, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey) tend to consider it “a bad thing”, one in

five respondents was unsure how (or refused) to answer. Moreover, in all countries concerned for which data is available, fewer people were concerned about the impact of China's growing military power on their country, and confidence in Chinese President Xi Jinping ("to do the right thing regarding the world affairs") has been on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2019).



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Fī muqābala ma'a qanāt "Phoenix" al-ṣiniyya... akkada an al-niẓām al-turkiyy musāhim bi-shakl mubāshir bi-bay' al-naft ma'a "al-nuṣra" wa "da'esh" wa ma'a al-amrikiyy... (In an interview with the Chinese channel "Phoenix", he stressed that the Turkish regime is directly contributing to oil trade with "Al-Nusra" and "ISIS" and with the Americans...). (2019, December 17). *Al-Watan*. Retrieved from <http://alwatan.sy/archives/224759>

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